New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"The Closing Door"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 5, 1949*

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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"The Closing Door"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
DECEMBER 2, 1949

TWO-on-the-AISLE

By Richard Watts Jr.

For a long time I have been insisting that one thing the theatre needed was a melodramatic thriller, but I certainly didn't have in mind such a confused and depressing affair as "The Closing Door," which had its first performance at the Empire last night. The work of Alexander Knox, who also plays its leading role, the new drama chiefly serves to demonstrate once more that, when an actor writes himself a fat part, the danger of things getting out of hand is almost inescapable. "The Closing Door" decidedly gets out of hand.

From time to time, there are indications that the author had somewhere in his mind the making of an excellent psychological melodrama. Indeed, although it has a confusing way of stopping and starting all over again, the first of its two acts is serviceable enough in its ominous approach to such juicy theatrical topics as insanity and homicide. It is in the second half, where the menacing excitement should be at its height, that Mr. Knox's little exercise in madness grows both hopelessly clumsy and downright boring.

Man Going Mad

Mr. Knox, whom you may remember as the cinema's Woodrow Wilson, has thought up the story of an unhappy gentleman, whose wife and son are gravely worried about him. He has taken to hiding a revolver under his pillow, throwing dollar bills about, and angrily breaking his boy's camera. His wife and a young doctor are convinced that he is going insane, but that there is a chance of saving his mind if they can get him to a private clinic. But he has a shadowy brother, who doesn't want him to go, and the brother seems rather a baleful figure.

I take it for granted that the relative was an evil character, and that he and their father had a lot to do with our friend's sad condition, but I can't be sure, because I never saw him. There is every indication that, in some previous version of the play, he did appear, and the program even contains the name of the actor who plays the part. Somewhere in the process of rewriting, however, the living presence of the character disappeared, and a lot of other changes took place. The confusion proves that the rewriting didn't clarify things.

Running a Gamut

There is quite a gory offstage incident in the second act, but I fear that the most horrifying part of the play's closing section is a scene in which Mr. Knox, the author, thought too much about the talents of Mr. Knox, the actor. In it, the playwright permits the thespian to be coy, winsome, pathetic, loveable, maniacal, sinister and pitiful in slow succession, and even, please believe me, play the piano and do a little juggling. Mr. Knox has his merits as an actor, but they don't include that gamut of exhibitionism.

The sorely-beset wife is earnestly played by Doris Nolan, and Richard Derr, who made a pleasant impression last season in "The Traitor," continues that impression as the rather bewildered doctor. In fact, all of the acting is satisfying enough, even though it is difficult to understand what some of the characters are up to. As I say, "The Closing Door" starts out promisingly, but its thrills, its suspense and its psychiatry somehow come to nothing amid the tedious confusion that overwhelms the second act.

"THE CLOSING DOOR"

Melodrama by Alexander Knox; staged by Lee Strasberg; settings and lighting by Paul Morrison; costumes by Robert Stevenson; presented by Cheryl Crawford at the Empire Theatre, December 1, 1949. The cast:

Norma Trahern....Doris Nolan
David Trahern....Jack Dimond
Connie.....Jo Van Fleet
Vail Trahern...Alexander Knox
Ollie Stevenson....John Shellie
Grandma.....Eva Condon
Dr. Ed Harriman..Richard Derr
Basil Johnson..Ronald Alexander
Don.....Randolph Echols
Hector Trahern...Alan Norman

Synopsis: The scene—Living-room of Vail Trahern's apartment. Act I. Scene 1. Noon. Scene 2. Four-thirty. Scene 3. Fifteen minutes later. Act II. No lapse of time.

Journal-American
DECEMBER 2, 1949

Empire Melodrama Admirably Acted

By ROBERT GARLAND

If there were a Petit Guignol, "The Closing Door" would fit into its repertoire. For Alexander Knox, as playwright, has written himself and Doris Nolan, as actors, a horror play which is never sufficiently courageous to give the screw of frightfulness its final turn. It is forever crying "Boo!" then sidestepping its own grim shadow.

It is, at first, sufficiently suspenseful. But when, time after time, the suspense leads to nothing but evasion, you begin to ask yourself what all the booing is for. The manic-depressive who is the melodrama's only motivation creeps up on situation after situation which promises to be good and Grand Guignol-ish. But which never really is!

Instead of poisoning his mother with a glass of arsenous wine, or garroting his wife with a silk scarf, or slaying his son with his own camera and then shooting him to make sure, he funks each of these good Grand Guignolian hair-raisings. Instead, he sits down and talks things over, explaining in detail to himself just how, and when, and why he got that way.

As playwright, Mr. Knox should know what he and Miss Nolan, as actors, want. As onlooker, it seems to me that what they need is less talk and more action, less sidestepping and more situation-facing, less hokum and more horror. After all, a horror play is a horror play, and, unless it is horrific, it is not much of anything. Not at the Empire.

There is, I fear, no reason for a Petit Guignol.

* * *

Hard to Live with

The manic-depressive who is the melodrama's motivation is Vail Trahern. He, with Norma, his wife, David, his son, and the Grandma who is, I think, his mother, live in a fascinating gadget-filled New York apartment. Having, as the better dictionaries say, a mental disorder marked by cyclothymic manifestations of excitation and depression, he——

Well, to look at and listen to, he is not an easy husband, father or son to live with. And, to listen to and look at, Norma, David and Grandma do not make the living easier. Neither does his friend who is Ollie Stevenson. Or his doctor who, I would not be surprised, is overly close to Norma when Vail is not looking. The doctor is Ed Harriman.

At the curtain's rise, the time of day is noon. Norma is preparing to have Vail taken off for, as she says, observation. Somewhere the boys from Bedlam wait to put him away with Blanche DuBois of "A Streetcar Named Desire" and Captain What's-His-Name of "The Father." Vail Trahern is not supposed to know this. But, smart paranoiac, he does!

So, as has been more than hinted, he plans the destruction of his household before the wagon comes to get him. But the best laid plans of mice and manic-depressives ofttimes go wrong. Vail Trahern's are no exception. At the curtain's fall, he is carrying the son he failed to slay with his own camera, and then shoot to make sure, to safety...

And himself into the wagon of the boys from Bedlam.

* * *

Acting is Good

This, "The Closing Door," is admirably acted by everyone concerned. By Alexander Knox, who as Vail Trahern, gives a rarely etched, minutely designed performance. As actor in his own play, he does not let himself down. But, as playwright of his own acting, he does. He lets Doris Nolan down, too, as his on-stage wife and co-star.

Eva Condon has herself a beautiful bit as the Grandma. Richard Derr is excellent as the doctor who is fonder of Norma Trahern than he should be. If Mr. Derr is good enough to put this over-fondness in, it is in there just the same. Jack Diamond is boyish as David, Vail Trahern's practically indestructible son. These child actors on Broadway!

Jo Van Fleet gets a laugh or two as Connie, the Trahern's maid-of-no-work. And there should be a paragraph of praise for whoever it is that rings the bells, blinks the lights, buzzes the telephones, whistles the speaking tubes, hums the elevator and makes all the major and minor noises which, for two acts and four scenes, accompany "The Closing Door's" unfolding.

But Alexander Knox has written a horror play that turns out to be no horror play. And all the ardent acting under Lee Strasberg's direction, all Paul Morrison's effective scenery, all Robert Stevenson's careful costumes, can not make of "The Closing Door" something it is not. And that is a Grand Guignol thriller...

If it is Guignol-ish at all, it is Petit.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 2, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

A Real Thriller

A PIECE of arresting and sustained grand guignol has opened at the Empire. "The Closing Door," by Alexander Knox, is a psychopathological thriller with interludes of effective and explicit violence. The author, who was so good in that fine film, "Wilson," gives a striking portrayal of the chief role, while his wife, Doris Nolan, Richard Derr and others in the company keep the production taut and terrifying. Under Lee Strasberg's able direction, the show has a macabre fascination.

The ending is somewhat unresolved, but it is arrived at with suspense and considerable eloquence.

* * *

Knox is no novice at murder mysteries. In this instance there is no actual murder, but the melodramatic burden of the play becomes even more gruesome. Since he has selected an incipient shizophrenic with a wild set of complexes for his menace, there is a good deal more than near strangulations and bloody doings in "The Closing Door." Whether his case history is psychiatrically correct or not, he has written a hair-raising and savage theatrical essay. In keeping his action tight and almost continuous, there is a mounting tension in the production which is irresistible. The Paul Morrison setting and lighting of a studio apartment, with an elevator light going on and off spasmodically, heighten the impact of the work.

Knox could have found no better player for the madman than himself. With a brilliant shifting of mood from a sullen psychopath to a gay and seemingly sane person, he carries the piece steadily through its melodramatic gyrations. He is a wily crack-brain, who sends a friend off to an asylum in his place and works havoc in his household. If, as the script suggests, he had a fifty-fifty chance of being cured at the outset of the proceedings, he was deranged at the end of a terrible day. Meanwhile the author-actor succeeds in making Vail Trahern a recognizable and somewhat sympathetic figure before the fellow goes completely off the trolley.

* * *

Miss Nolan has the arduous assignment of the psychopath's patient wife. She handles it with skill and resourcefulness, particularly in the harrowing climax. It is her terror rather than particular bits of violence which keeps "The Closing Door" absorbing. Eva Condon is splendid as Trahern's meddling mother, who cares more for appearance than her son's sanity. Young Jack Dimond gives a restrained performance of the small boy of the family and Derr is fine as a doctor. There is first-rate performing at the Empire in a play which is certain not to leave one bored.

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 2, 1949

Thriller Play Tells What Dunit-to-Him

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Not too long ago, a thriller was referred to as a who-done-it. Now that psychiatry explains everything from hatchet murder to fingernail biting, a thriller should be called a what-done-it-to-him.

In this modern vernacular, "The Closing Door" emphasizes cause of guilt rather than identity, and in doing so makes me feel very sorry for anyone who cannot put himself through a fine old-fashioned spine-tingling evening at it.

It has been far too long since a believable thriller came along, and this one is rife with suspense and tension.

Alexander Knox, who plays the lead as well as having written the play, begins from a most legitimate premise. Admit it or not, we are still subject to a queasiness about mental illness which makes its confession and consequent cure a mistaken matter of personnel loyalty. At the start of the play, Norma Trahern is trying desperately to get her son and mother-in-law out of her apartment so she can commit her husband to a sanitarium, as painlessly as possible.

The whole play grows ingeniously out of the character and illness of Vail Trahern. Often the situation seems to have been used up, but each time Knox gives it new life from a most convincing trend in Vail's condition.

Sometimes a suspenseful situation is resolved completely, when suddenly its whole tension is recreated by the simple device of having Vail change his mind. Instead of seeming arbitrary, such a move illustrates painfully the vacillating phases he is going through.

He is sly and crafty, or hurt and lonely. He is exhilarated and fanciful, then bitter and dour. He tricks his wife and doctor with the slickest ingenuity, then for no reason at all, under naive compulsion, tells the truth.

These many lenses of an unstable mind are devised with great care, haphazard as they may appear, and they are played with utmost conviction by the author.

There are moments when he is entranced by his own deeds, as he searches his mind for the source of his malady, as well as more frantic or more purposeful interludes. It is a case of an actor being every color horse on the merry go round, and Knox does it with no more than due relish, and infinite finesse.

During the first act Doris Nolan as the wife seemed occasionally too unmoved, but it turned out that she knew very well how far she had to go with the same situation before she was through. She saved up enough, under Lee Strasberg's wise direction, so she could play the truly horrible final sequence without trashing around.

Through no fault of his own, Richard Derr as the doctor seems misleading on both romantic and ominous counts, but this is the kind of play where red herrings, handsome and helpful or not, are legitimate and traditional.

Jack Dimond is bright as the youngster who comes so close to being victimized by his father's mania, and Eva Condon and Jo Van Fleet are uncompromisingly evil as the brainless mother-in-law and a slattern.

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 2, 1949

The Empire's 'The Closing Door' Is Psychological as All Get-Out

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Yes, Doctor, I know . . . You think I am nutty as a pecan ranch but I'm not . . . I am NOT, I tell you. I'm just a newspaperman trying to earn an easy living and in the course of my duties I went last evening to the Empire Theatre, where Cheryl Crawford was opening "The Closing Door," by Alexander Knox.

Doc, I tell you I am all right . . . really. If anybody is crazy it's those people up there on the stage, and not me. I came in with a girl. This man Knox not only wrote the play but he acts in it, too, and if you are looking for somebody to put in the booby hatch you go get him and let me alone. I keep telling you I'm all right, Doc, and if you are so almighty anxious to bag somebody you can go on up to the Cort Theatre and pick up Raymond Massey, who is acting in Strindberg's "The Father." Either one, I don't care.

This Knox, though, is a case. He is as batty as a Kentucky cave and he knows it—in the play, mind you. Has a blond wife name of Doris Nolan and a bright little son name of Jack Dimond and Eva Condon for a mother-in-law, so you would think he has it pretty nice.

A Real Screwball.

But no, Doc. This fellow Knox is crazy—as the actor in the play, mind you—and he is very foxy at the same time. Everybody knows he ought to be put away, including even me, but he stays around all evening talking about himself. Just like me, Doc. He is what you call a case in your business.

They try to get him put away all evening and they should have done it sooner. He is a photographer or something and his wife plays the piano with a little help from offstage and they have a really screwy apartment designed by Paul Morrison, where the automatic elevator comes right up in the living-room and turns on a red light when it arrives.

Oh, shut up, Doc. I'm trying to tell you and if you will lemme be we can get this over with and you and I can go to bed in our separate domiciles. Anyhow, this fellow Knox never does get put away. He keeps talking about himself and how he hated his father and his brother and how he got a little confoosed about personalities and then he bashes his little son, Jack Dimond, on the head and puts him away in a closet and then has to wipe the blood off the rug.

In this play, Doc, Mr. Knox seemed to have a reason for being mentally upset, what with World War II and an unhappy childhood. He can act daffy, too—looking pale and trembling and mumbling. But honest, Doc, he didn't scare me worth a damn and I am perfectly all right except that a good night's rest wouldn't hurt me. I suggest you go get one, too. At the Empire Theatre.